**Lecture: Motivation - Human Instincts and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

The textbook chapter on Motivation notes that instincts do not explain human behavior. I will go one step further for purposes of our discussion and say that humans have NO instincts. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes a series of motives that innately emerge in humans in a sequential order. Isn't this instinct?

**Humans and Instincts**

First, we must read the definition of instinct used by biologists and psychologists: a fixed-action pattern displayed by all members of the species in the same situation without any evidence of learning. This is not the same as a reflex like infants rooting and sucking behavior after birth that facilitates nursing for food. These are reflexes. Pulling your hand away from a hot pot on the stove is also a reflex. An example of instinct, as the text describes it, is the salmon swimming back to their birthplace to spawn. No learning is involved as they are all doing it for the first and only time and have not seen any other salmon do it. Some bird species will build a nest the same way as every other member of the species at the right time to lay eggs and hatch them. They will use the same materials if available, and the same construction methods even if they have been raised in isolation form other birds.

Geese flying to their wintering grounds hundreds or thousands of miles south from their birth place in the north has elements of instinct and learning. Instinct alone is not sufficient to explain this behavior as it seems young birds need to follow the flock once to learn the behavior. Some geese winter and summer in the same place. Yet in the north, when the ice forms on the lakes and snow covers the food sources, the geese must move to survive, and move they will, but not necessarily to the same area as their flock has gone winter after winter unless they are led there as in the movie "Fly Away Home" (I didn't see it!). But if disease breaks out in the wintering grounds of ducks or geese and decimates their population, the healthy ones do not move on to a disease free area. They will stay and die too. Their behavior is not flexible enough to adapt to the disease outbreak. The disease outbreaks are the result of overcrowding caused by the loss of habitat to human uses. However, hunters know that geese will gain altitude before crossing the boundaries of a waterfowl refuge where the hunters lay in wait. On the first day or two of the hunting season they cross the line low and the hunting is easy for the humans with their shotguns. But after the first day or two the geese gain altitude quickly and cross the boundary too high to hit with a shotgun. The learning may not be from seeing geese falling from the sky around them, as some will follow the first geese to fall as though the falling one has seen good food below. The learning is more likely due to the association of being at a certain point on the landscape, seeing humans, hearing the sound of guns, and some feeling the pain of shotgun pellets hitting them but not bringing them down. They must cross the boundary to eat and they instinctively increase distance between them and the pain-associated noise by going higher.

Written by: Bob Riesenberg, MSW, MA, Ph.D.

Whatcom Community College and Washington Online

A different species reacts differently to the same problem however. When the great buffalo massacres were occurring in the late 1800's, they reportedly would stand still as hunters shot each one in the herd methodically. They do not seem alarmed by their group falling all round them. They could survive other predators but not humans with guns as this was not in their genetically determined adaptive abilities. Geese adapt to a situation that buffalo do not. Being a mammal is no guarantee of being smarter in all situations. Instincts serve a species very well when the environmental conditions needed to survive remain the same as the conditions in which the fixed-action pattern evolved are stable. But if conditions change, instinct is a handicap.

Humans seem to be the most adaptable species on the planet because we have no fixed-action patterns. Each individual must learn how to survive by being taught by the caretakers. This provides the advantage of adapting to changing situations for each generation. Human genetics combine a great capacity and motivation to learn with little if any instinct. We can live in the arctic, under water, in outer space, in the dessert, in crowded conditions like Hong Kong, and in the wilderness. We shape our environment to serve our needs.......within limits. If it changed too quickly we may not be able to adapt, as we fear from the greenhouse effect or of a meteor striking the earth and clouding the atmosphere so much that plants cannot live.

We may also have a motive that will be our undoing. B. F. Skinner pointed out that humans are motivated to produce that behaviors that lead to rewards that they can see happening to them. He maintained that native peoples thinking several generations ahead was not anything more than being able to see that too much killing led to less to eat in the near future. The belief system that placed powers of retribution with spirits of abused species was a learned behavior pattern with little motive to violate or learn differently as the means of extinction of a species were not available in a way that made the extinction causing behaviors attractive or rewarding.

Today we have a different situation. Our technology has equipped us to engage in behaviors that do extinguish the habitat of other species even if we do not kill them ourselves. But each of is motivated to serve our own individual needs, and we have difficulty seeing the connection between what I want to buy at the store, my need for a job that pays well, and the extinction of species, global warming, or pollution of the planet. There is no direct visible connection, and we must rely on cognitive powers to govern our behavior through knowledge acquisition. The adaptive behaviors may require foregoing our short-term reinforcers to ensure the long-term health of th ecosystem. Skinner said we are not capable of doing this. Who can prove him wrong? Many of us do not believe the impact we have on the ecosystem, do not think our individual behavior is important, or believe that our technology will save us from the effects of consuming and polluting behavior. Skinner, of course, gave no credibility to the power of cognition to govern behavior and predicted our species demise in a few hundred years due to our inability genetically to change our behavior from going after short-term reinforcers to the behaviors needed to sustain ecosystems requiring looking ahead thousands or millions of years. So who is intelligent? Us with our technology that may cause our own and other species extinction? Or those species who do not cause their own demise and have their population held in check by the balance of life in the ecosystem.

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

So what about Maslow's hierarchy and behaviors around food and sex? The pyramid in Chapter 11 was used by Maslow to describe the order in which each motive came to dominate our behavior and energies. The bottom level includes the basics of life including behaviors involving food, water, air to breathe, sleep, pain avoidance and sex. We are motivated most strongly to satisfy these needs because without them there can be no life. They must be satisfied or there will not be energy to do anything else. Our thinking and energy goes with the next level that is not satisfied. So when we have enough of the basics, we begin focusing on the future of those needs and security from threats to them. When we have found a way to be secure, we focus on relationships because humans are not solitary animals. We want to love and be loved, to feel that we belong to a group like our family or community. Today this includes organizations like our high school, college, or work organization. When we feel this is secure and satisfying we turn our energies to being respected in others eyes and knowing that we are valuable to others in our skills and behaviors. When we feel that is stable and secure, we want to become as competent and skillful as possible, and the mere pursuit of higher competence and skill levels becomes rewarding even if it does not produce greater gains at any other level. In fact, we may jeopardize our basic needs to further our self-actualization as in leaving one job that pays well to take one that pays less but offers more opportunity for challenge and growth. The focus of our energies and behaviors is on the growth, on "being all that we can be" as the Army says in its recruiting commercials. It is satisfying to feel that we are progressing, doing things very well and becoming better at, no matter what others think. We worry less about our image in the eyes of others and more about the quality of what we do.

Self-actualizing individuals become most highly motivated by what Maslow called the "higher values"of humanity like peace, truth, justice, beauty, and exploration of unknowns. There is no scientific proof of Maslow's theory of self-actualization as it is described by Maslow. It is his perspective of the higher values of humanity as gathered by interviewing many people about their views of the most desirable values. Not everyone agrees with his findings, but the Hierarchy has intuitive appeal for most of us as it seems to reflect our experience. It has been applied to the work world by saying that employers must offer ways for employees to satisfy the basic life and security needs, their needs for relationships and belonging, and their needs for esteem and growth. Organizations that do this will keep their employees and employees will be motivated to give the organization their best efforts according to theories of behavior in the workplace.

Where are you in the hierarchy? Most of us are in varying levels, depending upon the area of our life we are talking about. If you find the topic of the hierarchy of needs and self-actualization interesting, visit the electronic textbook of Personality by George Booree of Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. Select the page for Abraham Maslow on the right hand column.

<http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/perscontents.html>